Responsible Finance Study: Capturing the Client Voice through IVR

By: Tanwi Kumari and Hema Bansal, Center for Financial Inclusion, Accion
As the financial industry is moving towards digitization, so are customers, adopting digital products through digital channels such as mobile phones. Despite low-touch delivery models, financial service providers (FSPs) still need to put in place feedback channels to understand client needs, preferences, and grievances, and to maintain client trust in digital financial services (DFS).

In our efforts to find better, more efficient ways to strengthen the provider/client feedback loop and elevate the voice of clients, we explored the benefits and limitations of Interactive Voice Response (IVR) technology. IVR is an automated telephone system technology that interacts with callers, gathers required information, and routes calls to the appropriate recipient. Clients can communicate by using either the touchscreen or keypad of their mobile phone, or by using voice telephone input. The responses take the form of voice, call-back, or any other related media. IVR technology can be leveraged to strengthen the relationship between provider and customers by allowing customization and adaptation of the message. It can be programmed to personalize voice messaging to the caller ID and comes with several language options that can be tailored to different customer segments.

IVR is a powerful tool for client surveys as it provides independence and flexibility of participation at a convenient time and location. But to be effective, IVR surveys require careful design, testing, and adaptation to address linguistic, cultural, or infrastructure challenges.

This Guidance Note explores how FSPs can effectively use Interactive Voice Response technology to elevate the client voice, and highlight key elements that enable FSPs to reap the benefits of IVR technology while addressing its limitations:

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**I. Introduction**

**BENEFITS**

- **Low-cost**: Lower cost, easier to scale
- **Neutral**: Clients may provide more candid answers to sensitive questions (e.g., regarding improper treatment)
- **Unbiased**: Avoids enumerator errors during data collection (it overcomes interviewer’s possible bias in recording responses)

**LIMITATIONS**

- **Connectivity**: Requires high mobile connectivity
- **Simple**: Works very well with a limited number of simple questions; for more complex questions, a mix of other survey methods is preferable
II. Preparing the survey

Q1. How to select respondents?
The first step is to identify the survey’s target participants and list the selection criteria. One of the challenges we have seen is the difficulty in identifying clients based on their SIM cards. For example, as a general practice, most clients in Asia tend to have multiple SIM cards and hence use multiple phone numbers interchangeably. Fierce competition between providers also promotes the use of multiple SIM cards.

KEY ELEMENTS:
- Select clients who have telephone access and identify type of telephone as it can help in the design of the survey (e.g., if clients are using smartphones, some gamification could be included).
- Ensure that participating FSPs update clients’ phone numbers.
- It is recommended to use a unique client ID to track the clients who took the survey, but this clearly depends on the objectives of the project. To encourage participation from only selected demographics and geography, specific client codes can be assigned.

Q2. How to determine the right sample size?
As IVR is an automated telephony system technology, the first step is to determine if and how clients have access to the technology (i.e., own or borrow the phone). CFI’s IVR research in Cambodia illustrated the challenges linked to limited access through friends or relatives. To maximize the number of participants and account for low hit rates and constraints faced by clients, the sample size should be large.

KEY ELEMENTS:
- Since the assumed dropout rate is 20 percent, it is recommended to correspondingly increase the sample size by 20 percent.
- Common issues linked to dropout: client’s lack of understanding of the system, low level of digital literacy, expired telephone number, poor network connection, etc.

Q3. How to design the survey?
Well-constructed surveys with a simple design not only encourage clients to complete the survey but also help in gathering accurate and meaningful data. IVR surveys should be designed to ensure that human psychological factors are taken into consideration and that there is no cost incurred by the clients.

KEY ELEMENTS:
- Focus on a limited set of questions that are most relevant to the purpose of the IVR research.
- Keep the questions short, clear, and precise to encourage more participation.
- Use simple terms rather than jargon.
- Design the call flow carefully to ensure that there is continuity in the stream of questions to increase interest and motivation to complete the IVR survey. A call flow is a road map for how calls will be handled from the moment they enter the phone system to the end of the call.
- Stick to two-option “yes/no” answers, rather than multiple choice that can lead to confusion and discourage clients from completing the survey.
- Each question in the survey should be less than five minutes, the average attention span of an adult respondent.
- Ensure that clients do not incur any cost in taking the survey. This requires collaboration with several carriers, as clients may have different SIM cards.
III. Integrating the IVR technology

Q4. How to prepare the survey for the IVR platform?

The IVR survey needs to be converted to a vocal support for the IVR platform. A number of elements ensure that this is done in a way that leads to quality answers and high participation. These include selecting a good quality local professional recording studio and checking that the IVR platform and the recording studio support the same type of audio files, such as .mp3 or .wav files.

**KEY ELEMENTS:**

- Translate the survey to vernacular language and test the tool with implementing partner FSP.
- Ensure good voiceover quality is used for recording the survey tool.
- Ensure the call flow design is appropriate and that there are no mistakes.
- Test the audio files with mono stereo (8000 Hz bit rate).
- Provide client with choices to repeat or skip any question, as sometimes clients do not want to answer questions, or they may not be relevant for their situation.

Q5. How to handle issues related to language and diction?

Language further complicates IVR procedures in countries where residents do not have a common language, and surveys must be offered in multiple languages. In mail and web surveys, the instructions can be written in multiple languages on the same screen. Orally, it is critical that clients be able to pick a language they understand. In addition, diction helps engage clients and keep them excited to complete the survey.

**KEY ELEMENTS:**

- Allow for time: the process to secure phone line connection can take up to four weeks to allow contracting with the telephone network provider and testing.
- Test the call flowchart and ensure that it includes options to skip questions yet still move forward.
- Break down questions if needed so that audio files are not too large (no more than 3MB).

Q6. How to set-up the IVR platform?

**Step 1: Bridge and connect the IVR survey to survey respondents**

The first step in setting up an IVR Platform is to establish a gateway to connect with the survey respondents and secure a phone number, in partnership with a telephone network operator. In the CFI Cambodia IVR project, we secured three phone numbers, one for each of the FSPs that participated in the research.

**Step 2: Manage and validate the call flow**

The second step involves synchronizing the call flow with the workflow, starting from introduction of the survey to the end, with an optional request to insert the client survey ID number or unique code. The same call flow needs to be used for both inbound (when the clients call the FSP using their own mobile phones) and outbound (when the FSP or its call center or software system calls the client on their phone numbers) calls with clients.

**Step 3: Upload the audio files**

The third step is to upload the pre-recorded audio files directly on the IVR platform, as defined in the onscreen call flowcharts for both inbound and outbound calling systems.

After the audio files are uploaded, clients can hear the survey from any phone for both inbound and outbound calling systems. Responses are collected automatically and stored for review.

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Q7. How to prepare clients to take IVR Survey?

Clients can and should be prepared to smoothly participate in IVR surveys. There are multiple ways to do this: sending pre-notification letters or flyers, sending SMS, or providing a toll-free number so that clients can call if they have questions.

**KEY ELEMENTS:**

- Ensure the pre-notifications have pictorial representation of the process to participate in the survey.
- In case a client ID or unique ID is being considered for the survey, ensure that the client ID number is clearly mentioned on the bottom right of both sides of the flyer.
- Provide a standardized sensitization script to front line officers (such as branch managers, loan officers, or enumerators) and/or a check list of issues to cover when explaining to clients how they can participate in the survey.
- Emphasize that the participation is free of cost.
- Show the client how the system works by demonstrating on the telephone keypad or touchscreen how to enter the number that matches the answer.
- Provide options for clients to repeat the question (e.g., by pressing “0” or “9”).

Q8. How to let clients choose options and ask questions?

Clients should have access to a toll-free number so that clients can call in case they have questions. They should also decide whether they prefer to participate in the survey via inbound or outbound calls.

Mock Script from CFI Cambodia IVR Project

- The CMA is conducting a client satisfaction survey. The purpose of the survey is to help us understand your borrowing and repayment experience. We value your opinion and want to make sure that you are a happy customer.
- Your participation in the survey is entirely voluntary and all information you provide to us will be considered safe and confidential.
- The study is unique because it uses a mobile-based system called interactive voice response (IVR), which is another way of surveying clients besides call centers and face-to-face interviews.
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